

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Indonesia, Australia Vital to U.S. Interests

By Merle David Kellerhals, Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama's weeklong trip to Guam, Indonesia and Australia is being seen as an important opportunity to advance America's security and economic interests in the Asia-Pacific region and to enhance essential partnerships, White House officials say.

"The Asia-Pacific is fundamental to our ability to achieve some of our top priorities, whether it's doubling exports and achieving balanced and sustainable growth or fighting terrorism and combating climate change," presidential adviser Ben Rhodes said during a recent press briefing on the upcoming travel. "In that effort, Indonesia and Australia are both essential partners to the United States."

Obama is scheduled to leave for Guam on March 21 and return to Washington on March 26 after visits to Indonesia and Australia. The trip was delayed by three days to allow the president more time in the United States to advance his health care reform legislation that is pending final approval in the U.S. Congress — a critical component of his domestic political agenda.

Indonesia, which is where Obama lived for four years as a boy with his mother, is the centerpiece of this trip. The visit will be capped with the signing of a new, strategic Comprehensive Partnership Agreement that had been proposed by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in November 2008. The agreement covers a range of issues such as economic ties, investment and trade, food security, science and technology, expanding bilateral education and exchanges, social issues, politics and military cooperation in a critically important geographic region.

"A U.S.-Indonesia strategic partnership would have to be based on: equal partnership and common interests. It has to bring about mutual and real benefit for our peoples," Yudhoyono said at the United States-Indonesia Society in November 2008. "It has to be for the long-term, and have strong people-to-people content."

Rhodes said during the teleconference briefing that Indonesia is the world's third largest democracy and has the world's largest Muslim-majority population. "It's also playing an increasingly important role in the international effort, such as the G20 [Group of 20 advanced and emerging economies] and the effort against climate change," he added.

For the United States, Indonesia has also been a critical partner on security issues such as fighting terrorism, as

well as Obama's broader efforts to advance relations with the Muslim world.

"So we want to underscore with the trip that the deepening and comprehensive partnership that we're developing with Indonesia in the region and the world, and as well highlight Indonesia's positive example as a strong democracy, a developing economy and a committed partner on a range of issues," said Rhodes, the president's deputy national security adviser for strategic communications.

After stopping in Guam on March 22 and speaking with U.S. military personnel and to residents of Guam, Obama is scheduled to arrive in Jakarta on March 23 for talks with Yudhoyono and his government, and for a joint press conference with Yudhoyono. The Comprehensive Partnership Agreement is expected to be signed during this visit. On March 24, Obama will give a major speech to talk about the partnership agreement, his connections to the Indonesian people and his years living there as a boy, Rhodes said.

The visit to Indonesia is being designed as a blend of political, cultural and business meetings to enhance ties with the nation. His meeting also will include talks with Indonesian parliamentary leaders. "We believe that this can be an economic relationship that can serve our mutual interests and will be part of, of course, the president's efforts to deepen our economic relationship across the region," Rhodes said.

On March 25, Obama travels to Bali for civil society events. Rhodes said that is because Bali is host to the Bali Democracy Forum, which is one of Yudhoyono's signature initiatives to advance democracy and civil society in the region and around the world.

Finally, Obama travels on to Canberra for consultations with Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

"We have very robust cooperation with the Australians on security issues, economic issues, [and] environmental issues," Rhodes said. Australia has been a close partner with the United States in the G20 and in providing military support in Afghanistan.

"The president will address the parliament and he'll speak to the depth of our alliance with Australia, the 70th anniversary of that alliance, and discuss several areas in which we can deepen our partnership in security, economic and environmental issues," Rhodes added.

CRITICAL REGIONAL PARTNERS

Jeff Bader, who is the senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council, said Australia and

Indonesia are members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, which is responsible for 55 percent of the global gross domestic product and 50 percent of global trade.

"This is a part of the world that's marked by a number of rising powers, namely China and India; a number of existing powers, Japan and South Korea; and some emerging important countries and powers like Vietnam and Indonesia," Bader told reporters. "In the context of a region that is evolving in this fashion, where there are shifts of power and influence, the U.S. presence is a crucial stabilizing force."

Bader said that the Asia-Pacific region highlights the changing global environment that the United States is facing in the 21st century. During the decisive meeting at the end of the Copenhagen climate change talks it became evident, he added.

"The players in the room were China, India, South Africa, Brazil and the United States," Bader said. "This is something that would not have happened 20 years ago."

A number of important middle powers — countries like Australia and Indonesia — have become vital in these kinds of decisions, Bader added.

Indonesian Press Freedom Holds Steady as Neighbors Decline

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — In the years since the Soeharto era ended in 1998, Indonesia has built and maintained a media environment that allows greater freedom and diversity, and with the decline of press freedom among some of its neighbors in East Asia, the country has emerged as one of the better performers in the region, according to the nongovernmental organization Freedom House.

However, continuing problems, especially in Indonesia's legal system, are preventing the organization from classifying the country's press as fully "free."

Karin Deutsch Karlekar, who works at Freedom House as a senior researcher and managing editor, told America.gov that after the 30-year Soeharto regime ended in 1998, the country's media experienced a "dramatic and big opening." The new government took concrete steps in favor of free expression by abolishing state censorship, passing legal guarantees for the press and allowing many new media outlets to receive licenses. Those steps immediately transformed Indonesia's ranking in the annual Freedom House survey from "not free" to "partly free."

Since 1998, Indonesian media have "really blossomed and flowered in terms of the number of outlets and the ability to report," Karlekar said, although harassment, media ownership and legal constraints, especially those connected with defamation laws, have kept Indonesia from progressing further in the organization's yearly analysis.

But Indonesia has not followed the example of some of its neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), such as Thailand and the Philippines, where press freedom has "really slipped backwards in the last five or 10 years." In contrast, the steady maintenance of Indonesia's status quo has earned the country recognition as "a leader among ASEAN nations in terms of press freedom," with "a vibrant and independent media," according to the most recent data available from Freedom House.

"There have been ups and downs over the last few years but in many other countries there have been considerable declines, and the fact that that hasn't happened in Indonesia is positive," Karlekar said.

Karlekar drew comparisons between Indonesia and the state of press freedom in India and Brazil. All are large countries classified as "partly free," with ethnically and religiously diverse populations and areas that are experiencing unrest.

"In places like that there are always more tensions on the press," she said; states can be sensitive about reporting on certain issues for fear of sparking violence. "There tend to be a few more restrictions and it's harder for those kinds of countries to get into the free category," she said. While all three face more challenges in opening up completely, she said the legal restrictions in Indonesia are much worse than in India and Brazil.

"The legal environment and the defamation is one of the main negative factors," she said. Cases brought against the media that allege untruthful or unfair reporting continue to be filed and prosecuted in many courts as criminal offenses, despite the Indonesian Supreme Court's 2005 ruling that all such cases should be handled under the civil code. Some of the defamation cases are politically motivated, Karlekar said, and filed by political or business leaders. She criticized the 2008 Information and Electronic Transfers (ITE) law that defined defamation so broadly that average citizens posting their opinions on Web sites are now vulnerable for prosecution.

The ITE legislation is "a very worrying development," as the Internet is becoming more and more widely used in Indonesia. Karlekar said one of the six individuals prosecuted under the ITE law in 2009 was a housewife who had simply posted critical comments about a private

hospital. The State Department also criticized the case in its 2009 Human Rights Report.

Harassment and intimidation continue against media outlets that are trying to expose corruption, and the repercussions for reporting corruption are "causing some media to self-censor," she said.

But Indonesia has very strong press and civil society institutions, such as the Alliance of Independent Journalists, which "have been vocal about reporting violations and pushing for reforms," including pressure against the defamation laws, Karlekar said. "There are some local watchdogs," and "they're really playing a legal role in terms of challenging legislation ... and putting out reports."

The transparency of media ownership also allows the Indonesian people to recognize the interests to which the various media outlets are beholden. With many politicians and businesses owning their own private outlets, the "nexus between political power and media outlets" can create a very partisan environment, Karlekar said. But the citizenry is aware of who owns what and is not afraid to file complaints when it sees biased coverage.

"People seem to be able to figure these things out," she said. "The space right now is so broad that there is space for independent outlets as well as some of these outlets that are being used for more political ends."

Ambassadorial Nominee to Syria Pledges "Straight Talk"

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The Obama administration has decided that having an ambassador in Damascus to engage the Syrian government is in the U.S. national interest, and its nominee for the job, Robert Ford, pledged "unfiltered, straight talk" with the Syrian government over areas of U.S. concern and on areas where there may be mutual interest.

In his March 16 nomination hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Ford said having a U.S. ambassador in Syria, a post that has been vacant since 2005, would "mark a change in how we try to persuade, how we try to press Syria, about where Syria's true interests are best found."

In his testimony, Ford listed the major U.S. goals in engagement with President Bashar Al-Assad's government: "First, getting Syria to be helpful in stabilizing Iraq; in addition, getting Syria to stop helping terrorist groups and to be more respectful of Lebanese

sovereignty; in addition, securing Syrian support for the [Middle East] peace process and securing Syrian cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency; and finally, in encouraging greater respect of human rights in Syria."

The decision to return an ambassador should not be perceived as "a reward to Syria," or that the concerns over Syria's past actions have changed, he said.

"We should be talking every day and every week with top-level officials who have influence and authority in Syria. They need to hear directly from us, not from the media and not from third-party countries, what American calculations and American thinking are, and what could be the potential costs to Syria of their miscalculations," he said.

Ford welcomed Syria's willingness to allow Iraqi refugees into the country, such as Iraqi Christians from Nineveh province who fled violence, and how it has provided the refugees with some assistance and recently gave them permission to work in Syria.

"In some ways, the Syrian government has been very helpful on the Iraqi refugee issue," Ford said. He urged officials in Damascus to allow more nongovernmental organizations to work with the refugees and facilitate efforts to issue visas for more of them to enter the United States.

Syria can also shut down the few remaining networks that are allowing foreign fighters to cross its border into Iraq, Ford said. The number has been significantly reduced since mid-2007 from about 100 fighters per month to an average of 10 per month, he said. The success of Iraqi and coalition forces in shutting down the networks on the Iraqi side likely accounts for much of the change, but the Syrians "have shut down some networks," and have the capacity to do more, he said.

"There is more they could and should do. And frankly, were they to do that, I think the Iraqis would notice and would respond," Ford said.

He acknowledged that Syria "would like to see a change" in the U.S. sanctions applied on the nation. However, some of those sanctions are caused by Syrian support for organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas, which have been designated as terrorist groups. "We can't change those sanctions and the restrictions that they bring about until the Syrians change their behavior. We have to be very clear with them about that," Ford said.

Along with urging Syria and hard-line Palestinian groups in Damascus to allow negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians to move forward, Ford said the United States

wants to “foster movement” toward Syria’s own peace agreement with Israel, a move that Syria has expressed interest in pursuing.

“It really would change the region. It would be a game changer,” Ford said, adding that a comprehensive peace settlement is “very much in American interests.”

Although indirect discussions mediated by Turkey in 2008 did not result in an agreement, they made “considerable headway,” he said.

Ford said it is important to “find a formula to get the Israelis and the Syrians back to these negotiations so that we can see how far the Syrian government is willing to go in terms of commitments with respect to normalization and regional stability.”

Ford said the Obama administration’s policy of intensified dialogue with Syria “will not come at the expense of any other state in the region, including Lebanon,” repeating its commitment to “Lebanon’s sovereignty and stability.”

He welcomed the Syrian decision to open an embassy in Beirut and the announcement of a joint effort with Lebanon to delineate their common border. The Syrians have said there will be “a new era of relations” between the two countries, and Ford welcomed the statement but said “we would like to see that actually implemented on the ground.” That includes an end to the shipment of weapons from Syria to Hezbollah and other groups inside Lebanon. Such shipments undermine the Lebanese state and contribute to a regional instability that Ford said does not serve Syria’s own interests.

“It is destabilizing if Hezbollah has rockets that can hit farther into Israel. It complicates everyone’s calculations and raises the risk of miscalculations and the risk of conflict,” he said.

Hong Kong Performers Share Cultural Heritage

Hearing and hearing-impaired artists cross boundaries

By Andrew Malandrino
Staff Writer

Washington — It is not often that a monk, a monkey, a pig and a water demon journey together for a common purpose, but that is the premise of *Journey to the West*, one of the great classical novels of Chinese literature.

Hundreds of people got a glimpse of this expansive story during the recent visit to Washington by the group Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong (ADAHK). An organization that strives to improve disabled persons’ access to and participation in the arts, ADAHK’s

primarily hearing-impaired performers brought their interpretation of the Chinese classic to audiences at Gallaudet University in Washington as part of QuestFest, a two-week visual theater festival that ran from March 1 to March 14.

Sponsored by a grant from the U.S. Department of State, and in cooperation with Quest: arts for everyone, performers from ADAHK visited Washington to lead and participate in workshops, exchange ideas with other artists and present their interpretation of *Journey to the West*.

GO WEST, YOUNG MONK

Journey to the West is a redemptive story that highlights the ideological differences and similarities between Eastern and Western cultures. Originally set during the Tang Dynasty (approximately A.D. 618-907), ADAHK’s abridged production is an original interpretation of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang’s journey to India in search of religious texts, known as sutras.

The journey tests each of the four travelers until, finally, the monk Xuanzang comes face to face with the seven deadly sins from Western tradition. This is a total departure from the original story and is meant to highlight the universal concepts of forgiveness, understanding and liberation.

Other than Cho Kin Chan, who plays the monkey king, the performers are hearing impaired. Wai Keung Wong portrays Xuanzang, Kam Wah Lee acts the greedy pig and Ching Hoi Wong performs the Friar Sand, the water demon. Man Shan Tong, Yee Ning Wong and Ching Wai Fung play an assortment of courtesans, spirits and powerful women whom the travelers encounter during their journey.

SPEAKING WITHOUT WORDS

The ADAHK company showcases the beauty and complexity of theater freed from language barriers. Its actors and production staff focus on imagination, creativity and cultural context to express themselves and the themes of their story.

The core communicative method of this production is classical Chinese opera movements. *Journey to the West* marks the first foray into this style for the company’s deaf actors. These movements highlight character, makeup, entrances and costumes as well as movements and gestures. After an open audition for hearing-impaired actors in Hong Kong, the team had five weeks to learn the Chinese opera movements and incorporate them into their personal acting styles. Many of the actors never had performed staged fights, and the jumps, handstands and

cartwheels were a challenge.

For Shun Him Yip, the production's director, *Journey to the West* is his first time working with deaf actors. He very much enjoyed the experience because the visually artistic style associated with Chinese opera movements lends itself beautifully to the ADAHK performers' strengths. Yip, who is not deaf, describes himself as a very visual person, and he enjoyed working with the deaf actors because they shared a common focus on the body, the face and other visually expressive elements of acting.

QUEST FOR OPPORTUNITY

Journey to the West is a perfect fit for QuestFest, whose Web site bills it as a festival "dedicated to the use of movement, gesture, and digital media to tell stories. By stripping away the artifice of language, QuestFest builds bridges between disparate communities and cultures."

Toward this end, ADAHK's *Journey to the West* successfully combines elements of Chinese and Western culture into visual theater that transcends age, cultural background and language.

Cho Kin Chan's irreverent monkey king provides comic relief throughout the production. With impeccable timing and exciting action, he creates a character who strongly appeals to children. Wai Keung Wong's Xuanzang and his final epiphany provide the thoughtful core of the production, and the new ending triggers a complex, philosophical response from the audience.

Stylistically elaborate painted masks used in the show to represent the seven sins combine the Chinese tradition of beautiful makeup with the Italian improvisational style of using masks. The ending's Eastern/Western philosophical bent also gives all audiences something to consider by juxtaposing philosophies.

Each actor brings his or her own approach to the performance and the Chinese opera style. For some, this means Western hip-hop dance elements, as seen during Xuanzang's departure in which several of the actors incorporated Michael Jackson's moonwalk into their dance set.

How has ADAHK been received in the United States? "From the audience's reaction, it's [been] just great," said the director, Shun Him Yip.

It is the joyful and nuanced acting that makes communicating across cultures and between hearing and hearing-impaired audiences possible. ADAHK was formed in 1986 under the banner "Arts are for Everyone." In promoting access to and participation in the arts for persons with disabilities, ADAHK has provided

professional training, public outreach and general education regarding the rights and needs of disabled artists.

"Quest: arts for everyone" was founded in Maryland in 1997 to use "the arts to promote understanding and show that there are no limits to what people can accomplish," according to its president, Tim McCarty. ADAHK's successful performance of *Journey to the West*, and the organization's relationship with Quest and the hundreds of audience members and workshop participants met during its most recent U.S. visit exemplify the organization's motto: "The arts know no boundaries."

Cooperation among the State Department, Quest and ADAHK has introduced and created partnerships for hundreds of disabled and nonimpaired artists and fans throughout the world. As Yip says, "If we both want to try to communicate, it's totally possible."

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